

Soldiers

Online

FORGING THE L



Members of the U.S. Military Academy's baseball team express their enthusiasm during a break in a practice session.



A cadet walks past the entrance to Washington Hall after completing morning classes. The U.S. Military Academy's stone architecture creates a sense of tradition and solidity.

LONG GRAY LINE

Story and Photos by SSG John Valceanu

WEST Point, N.Y., has played a critical role in the history of the United States since the earliest days of our nation. Soldiers in the Continental Army were drilled by the Prussian Baron Von Steuben on the West Point plain. Later in the Revolutionary War, West Point was fortified by the Polish civil engineer Thaddeus Kosciuszko, and became a formidable military installation that allowed Continental soldiers to control a portion of the mighty Hudson River. Benedict Arnold earned his infamous place in





The U.S. Military Academy was established at West Point in 1802 by President Thomas Jefferson, and the first two cadets graduated later in the year.

history while serving as West Point commander for conspiring to turn the post over to the British.

The U.S. Military Academy was established at West Point in 1802 by President Thomas Jefferson, and the first two cadets graduated later in the year. These two young men would prove to be the first in what would become known as "The Long Gray Line." This nickname for the cadets and alumni refers to the unbroken line of officers to serve the nation.

Many of the United States' greatest generals, and two of its presidents, have been part of the Long Gray Line. The list of illustrious graduates includes legendary leaders like Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee; George Armstrong Custer and Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson; Douglas MacArthur and

George Patton; Omar Bradley and Dwight D. Eisenhower; and Norman Schwarzkopf. Both Secretary of the Army Louis Caldera and Army Chief of Staff GEN Erik Shinseki are West Point graduates.

But a long, rich history and proud tradition are only a part of what makes West Point a special place. Today, almost 200 years after its founding, the military academy retains its status as one of the nation's most revered educational institutions because it has never strayed from its primary mission: taking some of America's finest young men and women and helping to shape them into some of the nation's finest leaders.

One young person currently being shaped is Cadet Lauren Miree Rowe, who completed her first year at the

academy this spring.

"The first year went by so fast, I can hardly believe it," Rowe said. "There were some rough days, even some rough weeks, but it was mainly exciting."

Like most cadets admitted to West Point, Rowe graduated near the top of her high school class and received high scores on her college entrance exams. She also played soccer and ran track. In addition, she is following a family tradition. Her father graduated from the academy in 1973, and her sister will be starting her senior year in the fall.

"I think I decided to attend West Point by listening to my dad talk about how good the academy was for him," Rowe said. "My sister also contributed by coming home with stories about



Cadets enjoy a meal in Washington Hall's dining facility.

what it was like here. I began to view the academy as a challenge, and I started telling myself 'I can do this.'"

Liking to overcome challenges and an innate confidence that she can accomplish virtually anything are traits Rowe shares with many other West Point cadets.

"If you put your mind to it, nothing is going to stop you. If you really want to do something, you'll be able to do it," Rowe said. "I've always been good at setting goals and working toward them. I was the kid my parents never had to remind to do my homework. It's something internal, something I've had since I was born."

Rowe had her pick of other colleges to choose from, including the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md., but she said she chose West Point because "the military academy graduates I've met were head and shoulders above graduates from other colleges."

Like Rowe, Cadet Steven Langan, who will begin his final year this fall, decided to attend West Point because of a personal experience: a week-long invitational academic workshop sponsored by the academy. The workshop allowed Langan a glimpse of what student life is like at West Point, and he said he was hooked.

"When my parents came to pick me up, I told them: 'This is it, this is where I'm going to school,'" Langan said.

Though he does not come from a military family, Langan said he was committed to military service.

"I come from a small town in Oklahoma. God and country were the big values in my family, and they're the most important things in my mind," Langan said. "My whole life, I'd been thinking about the military. If I hadn't come here, I'd have either enlisted or done ROTC at another university. I



Cadet Eric Gutier, class of 2000, works on his computer in his barracks room before final examinations.

believe military service is a very honorable profession, and it allows you to live for something higher than yourself."

Langan's perfect 4.0 average in high school and his status as class valedictorian, along with his exemplary test scores, made him a good candidate for the academy. He said his participation on the track team also went a long way toward helping him prepare for West Point.

"Being a runner builds self discipline. Getting out there and training even when you really don't want to,

and systems engineering. He said the academics are "very rigorous, but rewarding. And if you find yourself getting behind, there are many opportunities to get help. Teachers are always available to work with you if you need a little extra help."

The cadet has some advice for individuals considering attending the academy: He thinks people should carefully consider their motives for becoming cadets.

"Cadets who attend the academy for the wrong reasons probably will not be successful. You shouldn't come here to build your resume," Langan said. "You should come here because you want to be an officer in the Army and to lead troops."

While the military academy offers a world-class education free of charge to those able to gain admission, Langan points out that the experience is very different from that found at civilian institutions of higher learning. Cadets at the military academy have requirements placed upon them that students at other colleges, even ROTC cadets, do not



Male and female cadets play hard and have fun during intramural sports competitions. West Point cadets are required to participate in sporting events.

running even when your body is screaming at you to quit, and not letting anything stop you," Langan said.

Langan is majoring in mathematics

have.

MAJ Tim Schroyer, an electrical engineering instructor, agreed with Langan. He said the academy "expects a lot from the cadets," and imposes a



Each class in the corps contains about 1,000 cadets, all of whom study a common core of academic subjects.

broad scope of requirements upon them.

"Academy cadets have a very regimented schedule, and the resulting time constraints make life difficult for them, particularly for students majoring in time-consuming, hard-science subjects," Schroyer said. "When I was an ROTC cadet majoring in electrical engineering, I had the luxury of going into the lab at night and spending all night working. Here, if their work is not completed by a certain time, they don't get a chance to do it."

Typical academic days for cadets

include a pre-breakfast morning formation, four hours of classes in the morning, a lunch formation, another two hours of classes, and a couple of hours of athletic activity before dinner. Cadets normally spend three or more hours studying after dinner.

Each class in the corps contains about 1,000 cadets, all of whom study a common core of academic subjects. On top of the broad studies afforded by the common core, cadets select individual majors or fields of study in which they conduct more in-depth studies. Additionally, cadets must

complete military science sessions and eight semesters of physical education.

While cadets may have the freedom to choose individual majors, all cadets minor in some form of engineering, such as civil or environmental or electrical. The only degree awarded by the academy is the bachelor of science.

"When we teach an academic subject, we try to help the cadets see how it applies to the military," said LTC Daniel Ragsdale, a computer science instructor. "All cadets get an introduction to computer science, and we try to show them that this isn't just a technical issue, it is an issue of warfare."

Ragsdale said the academy's computer lab was built from salvaged machines, which were refurbished to bring them up to required specifications. Though it saved tens of thousands of taxpayer dollars, the lab provides cutting-edge training capabilities that allow cadets to develop an intimate understanding of the possible computer threats they could someday face.

"We focus on developing the ability to degrade the enemy's capabilities while protecting our own," Ragsdale said. "And while the focus of the academy is on teaching, we also conduct research during the summer. We believe that we're better able to teach our students by conducting our own research into our areas of interest."

Ragsdale said he is very impressed with the caliber and quality of the cadets who come through his classroom.

"They're excited to be at West Point, and they're excited about learning," Ragsdale said. "They're also the highest caliber undergraduate

Cadets walk out of Thayer Hall, which houses a number of the academy's classrooms and laboratories. State-of-the-art facilities, incorporating cutting-edge technology, are housed within the hall's traditional stone walls.



students in the nation, and they consistently display a level of understanding well beyond what I had expected in a graduate program.”

Ragsdale said the academy’s faculty is also a “great mix” of permanent military faculty, civilians and officers who serve as instructors for three years and return to their Army specialties.

“Civilians enhance the program with their different perspectives, and permanent faculty provide continuity,” Ragsdale said. “Officers like me who rotate in and out of the teaching jobs bring a lot of real-world experience to the department.”

Away from the classrooms, cadets live two to a room in barracks that are very much like regular college dormitories. Unlike regular dorms, however, lights are out by midnight each weeknight. Weekends are often taken up with military training, as is part of each summer. Freshmen cadets, known as “plebes,” are rarely allowed to leave the installation, and even cadets in later years require passes to go off-campus.

Cadet Dave Lambron, who begins his final year at West Point this fall,



Cadets sheathe their sabers as they enter Washington Hall to eat lunch. Tradition is incorporated into virtually all aspects of the cadets’ day, including meals.

reflected on his academy experience.

“The first two years were long, rigorous and sort of boring. It was a very constricted world. There was no freedom, and very few responsibilities,” Lambron said. “It was not much fun, but I know that it prepares you well for being a good leader.”

Lambron said many cadets complain about the rigors, but he doesn’t think they’re really complaining.

“We’re always saying that we don’t want any more challenges, we want to have it easy, but I don’t think we mean it,” Lambron said. “People who don’t like challenges don’t make it into West Point, and if they do they won’t be here long.”

First-year Cadet Brandon Stankiewicz echoed Lambron’s sentiments.

“You really have to want to be here. I talk to friends who are in college and who are going out and having fun at night instead of being in the barracks, and I get a little envious sometimes,” Stankiewicz said. “But I know you have to be willing to make sacrifices in order to do well here.”

Stankiewicz said he was considering both West Point and the Naval Academy, but he decided to go with the military academy based on his experiences with admissions representatives.

“With the Navy, I felt like I was just a number. If I had a question, I would call and have to leave a voice message on an answering machine. Sometimes I’d get a call back, but often I wouldn’t,” Stankiewicz said. “Everyone at the West Point admissions office was very helpful and



Instructors and students get together in Grant Hall to discuss issues raised during the year during an end-of-course evaluation session.

concerned. I always got the feeling they cared about whether or not I attended the academy.”

Like Lambron and Stankiewicz, second-year Cadet Gavin Rice is ready for a little more freedom than the military academy offers him, but he’s also cognizant of the growing process resulting from the West Point experience.

“As a 23-year-old prior-service soldier, I sometimes get a little tired of being stuck in my room at night,” Rice said. “But I wouldn’t trade a day of it. The academy helps you understand the word ‘sacrifice.’ It teaches you the value of time and how to carefully figure out how much time will be required to accomplish each goal. The experience is very satisfying, but it’s not easy. If it were easy, everyone would do it.”

Rice said he is particularly grateful for the opportunity to attend the academy. He was a wheeled-vehicle driver at Fort Carson, Colo., when his company commander suggested he apply to the West Point Preparatory School at Fort Monmouth, N.J.

“I didn’t have the best grades in high school, and I certainly never thought I’d be here at the academy,” Rice said. “The Army offered me a job I wanted after high school, and I took it. Then I was offered a chance to attend the Prep School, and I took that. Now I’m here

“For me, West Point is a gift given by people who see something in you they believe in, and who then allow you a chance to serve society,” Rice said. □



A West Point cadet observes how a cadet candidate from the USMA Preparatory School reassembles a squad automatic weapon during this year’s Sandhurst competition.